The workplace bully is not always a lone wolf

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In today's competitive organisations, it is all too common for bullies to act out in the workplace. Many of us have either been victimised or witnessed a co-worker being bullied. This is more common than illegal forms of harassment (based on things such as race, sex, or age). The costs to companies that allow the situation to go unchecked are substantial. Many workers quit their jobs to escape the abuse. Some take medical leave. And many suffer ill health as a result. Co-workers that witness bullying are less productive and engaged in their work.

This type of abuse isn't typically a one-time occurrence. Rather, it is an ongoing campaign of attacks against the target, who is usually unable to defend him or herself effectively. What does workplace bullying look like? While it usually doesn't include a physical attack, there are many ways in which the target can be abused. The target may be ignored or socially isolated from the rest of the work group. Hateful, untrue rumours may be spread about the target, or the individual may be publicly humiliated, belittled, or made the butt of jokes. The bully tries to tear down the target's self-esteem and may interfere with his or her work, sabotaging the target in order to get the target "in trouble" with management.

The abusers are often the target's direct supervisor. But co-workers also mistreat others in the work group. Much of the research on workplace abuse assumes that the bully operates alone, as a lone wolf. The study we conducted focused on the "wolf pack" occurrence, when several members of the work group gang up on the target. When this happens, the target experiences almost relentless abuse because there is always someone tormenting him or her. Imagine how much worse it would be to have the whole work unit undermine and abuse you; there would be no escape. Your workdays would be filled with verbal and emotional harassment and you would be hard-pressed to attend to your work duties.

In our research, we found that if the supervisor is a bully, then co-workers are also more likely to mistreat others. It makes a lot of sense; people want the boss to like them. What better way to win the boss's favour than to join in on the bullying and abuse of the worker that the boss has targeted? Supervisors set the culture for the work group and many people seek to "fit in" with the established standards for behaviour.

We surveyed over 500 people and found that when the boss is the bully, workers feel that the harm is greater than when one of their co-workers is the tormenter. That is not especially surprising. If only one co-worker bullies the target, it is harmful but not nearly as harmful as when the supervisor is the attacker. The most interesting finding from our study, however, was that being abused by a group of co-workers is not judged to be as harmful as being abused by a supervisor. Being tormented by one's supervisor trumps all other forms of bullying, even the collective assault from many co-workers in the work unit. When the boss is the bully, targets suffer the greatest consequences.

This should be a wake-up call to anyone in a management or supervisory role. Your behaviour is contagious and has a major impact on how employees feel about their work environment. You are a role model and others will "follow the leader". Remember that your actions are powerful! Your direct reports will experience productive, joyful work lives or lead tortured, unsatisfactory work lives in large measure based on how you treat them. Check your behaviour to be sure you are modelling respectful conduct that you would be proud for your team members to follow.

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Notes:

- *This article is based on the authors' paper Alpha and Omega: When Bullies Run in Packs, Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 2015, Vol. 22(4) 377–386. Doi: 10.1177/1548051815594008*
- *This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of*

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